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## CONTENTS

Sr. No.	Author	Title of the Paper	Page No.
1	Dr. Jeyaseelan Gnanaseelan	A Corpus Analysis of the Prepositions used in Letter Writing in English	01
2	Abolfazl Ramazani & Sima Sharbaz	Dialogic Voices in T. S. Eliot's <i>The Waste Land</i>	16
3	Dr. Shamala Ratnakar	Multicultural Identity and Immigrant Tradition in Rohinton Mistry's <i>Squatter</i>	35
4	Shachi Sood & Dr. Vandhana Sharma	The Woman in the Body: Locating the Individuality within Patriarchy in Dattani's <i>Thirty Days in September</i> and <i>Ek Alag Mausam</i>	41
5	R. Saradha	From a Marginalist Vacuum towards a Nominalist Continuum: A study of Shoban Bantwal's <i>The Dowry Bride</i>	48
6	Dr. M. Lavanya & Prof. Dr. R. Ganesan	Perceived Physical and Psychological Stress among Higher Secondary School Students: A Pilot Study	57
7	Dr. Shivaji Sargar & Prof. Shivaji Kalwale	Allusiveness in the Poetry of T.S. Eliot with special reference to <i>The Waste Land</i>	65
8	Dr. R. R. Thorat	Use of Mythical Symbols in Raja Rao's <i>Kanthapura</i>	71
9	Dr. Pooja Singh & Dr. Archana	Glam to Sham: Woman's Innate Desire for Commitment	77
10	Dr. Sudhendu Giri	Modern Entrepreneurial Spirit in an Urbanised Economy	88
11	Ali Arian	The Elements of Humanity and Sufism in Henry David Thoreau's <i>Walden</i>	105
12	Tania Mary Vivera	Mindscaping Oskar Schell: Mental Spaces and Conceptual Blending in <i>Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close</i>	111
13	Mr. Chaitanya V. Mahamuni	Digital Video Watermarking Using DWT and PCA in Encrypted Domain	118
14	Dr. Aruna	Behaviour of Consumers Regarding Electronic Goods in Pune Region	129
15	B. Moses	Syntax and Semantic Problems in Translating Indira Parthasarathy's <i>Helicoptergal Keezhe Irangi Vittana</i> into English	134

16	Dr. Yogesh Jain	Mutual Funds & Other Financial Instruments: A Study of Customer Behaviour with special reference to Udaipur	138
17	Dr. S. Karthikkumar	Feminism vs. Humanism in Anita Rau Badami's <i>The Hero's Walk</i>	152
18	Dr. Shivani Jha	Ecocriticism and Ecocritical Interpretations of Selected Recent Indian Writings in English	156
19	Abu Siddik	Vivekananda's Vision of Religion: A Brief Survey of Hinduism and Islam	163
20	S.A. Thameemul Ansari	Best Practices in ELT: A Need for Reflection in the English Classroom	169
21	S. Rajeswari	The Big Heart: Conflict between Tradition and Modernity	176
22	Prof. Arvindkumar A. Kamble	Western Women in Oscar Wilde's 'The Importance of Being Earnest'	185
23	Prabal J. Roddannavar	The Representation of Hatred in <i>The Bluest Eye</i>	188
24	Prof. Divya Chansoria & Mr. Umakant Gajbir	Democracy, Human Rights and Its Implementation	193
25	Mr. Chandan Bharti Mishra	An Analysis of Habitat Fragmentation and Recent Bottlenecks Influence	197
26	Dr. Shilpa Mishra	The Politics of HRM in India	202
27	Megha Katoria	Representation or Misrepresentation: Image of Women in Media	210
28	Dr. Ram Kalap Tiwari	Role of Spiritual Activities to Strengthen Mental Health and Well Being of Adolescents	215
29	Chintan V. Pandya, Jignasu P. Mehta, Aditee J. Jadeja & B. A. Golakiya	Antifungal Activity of Crude Extract of <i>Butea Monosperma</i>	226
30	Dr. Jaydeep Singh Dangi	<i>Computer par Hindi Suchana Praudyogikike Vikasmein Badha Nahin Balki Vikas Hain</i>	230
31	Angela Sadeghi Tehrani	A Rebellion through Confession – A Note on the Confessional Tone of the Poems of Kamala Das and Forough Farrokhzad	233
32	Dr. Riktेश Srivastava	Analysis of n-Tier Electronic Commerce Architecture Using Different Queuing Models	239
33	Nima Shakouri	Revisiting the Role of Gender in the Use of Language Learning Strategies: A Poststructuralist Look	247
34	Shahnawaz Ahmad Mantoo	Geo-strategic Importance of Bangladesh in Contemporary South Asia: An Analysis of Bangladesh-US Partnership	255
35	Ashish Kumar	Social Entrepreneurships in India: An Exploratory Study	261

## Geo-strategic Importance of Bangladesh in Contemporary South Asia: An Analysis of Bangladesh-US Partnership

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### Abstract

Today the strategies are important in the international relations particularly in the South Asian region as it is getting strategic importance throughout the world. Every country has some strategic significance by one way or the other, and every country needs to show maturity in handling the strategically complex situations. Bangladesh too has some strategic advantages in relation to other countries and it has to show maturity in handling the complex situations. The geographical location of Bangladesh is a preponderant fact that influences the decision makers in making foreign policy because of the various elements in the formulation of foreign policy of a country in which geographic location occupies a significant position. This geographical location has made Bangladesh a prime actor among the major powers of the world particularly United States of America. Geopolitics examines the political and strategic significance of geography and in this context geography is defined in terms of the location, size and resources of the places. Geopolitical location of Bangladesh gives it both strength and weakness from different perspectives. The recent strategic partnership between the Bangladesh and US will be very much important to watch. This paper will look in to the relations of both countries. The world has changed and every country is looking for fulfillment of national interests and Bangladesh too has to keep the national interest in the centre of the foreign policy.

**Key Words:** strategy, security, United States, wars, geography, India, Bangladesh

### Introduction

Ever since the concept of large scale troops movement became part of “warfare strategy” has become inseparable from the conduct of warfare. Strategy, since then, has been a constant subject of study by the commanders who would direct armies in battle. As the battle grounds became bigger and bigger involving continents, more and more geography came into play in conceptualizing the future wars. It was in the Napoleonic era that geo-strategy became the province of the commanders as well of the sovereign. Two great wars gave this concept a boost, with additional emphasis laid on it by the geographers turned geo-strategists. Geo-strategy is not absolute but some of the

ingredients or factors could be absolute and the value could change with changing characters of variables. Geo-strategy is transparent yet perceptive. Therefore, one needs to understand the prevalent geo-strategic reality in the global context in general and regional context in particular. One has to be clear in understanding as to how the global reality affects the region, such as Bangladesh, which is increasingly becoming an arena of middle power rivalry involving the lone superpower by one actor or another to counter balance the adversary.

### Strategic Importance of Bangladesh

In South Asian context, the region that we are directly concerned with, rapid geo-strategic changes have to be viewed in right

perspective to understand the regional geo-strategic ambience, particularly by the policy makers of peripheral countries like Bangladesh. This is essential to make a comprehensive assessment of the regional dynamics. Bangladesh is part of South Asia that continues to be one of the most volatile geo-strategic regions, with three neighbouring nuclear powers. South Asia's balance of power after the emergence of Bangladesh in 1971 tilted completely towards India. India became the dominant power in the region with the nuclear explosion in 1974. However, this situation was not without a challenge. Pakistan, which was still recuperating from the ignominious military defeat by India, decided to counter the regional giant with equal ferocity. India's nuclear explosion pushed Pakistan into a collision course, having triggered an unholy nuclear race that continues unabatedly. The nuclear race culminated in 1998 in a series of nuclear explosions, first by India and then by arch-rival Pakistan. The two regional antagonists became the sixth and the seventh nuclear powers. It is notable that three out of seven proven nuclear powers are Asian countries, sharing common and disputed boundaries.

Bangladesh could not remain out of the ambit of changes occurring globally and regionally. With the changed South Asian geo-strategic scenario, Bangladesh's geopolitical importance increased due to four factors. First, Bangladesh began to be referred to as the third largest Muslim country in the world and as the second in the region. The second factor is Bangladesh's location within the 'geo-strategic frontier' of India, South Asia's most powerful country. The third is Bangladesh being in close proximity with

China, Asia's largest power and considered a strategic rival of both the US and India and the fourth factor is recently concluded Strategic Partnership between US and Bangladesh.

Despite her small size, Bangladesh does have certain geographical advantages that make her important to regional and extra regional powers which may drag her into a complex strategic scenario created due to rivalries between the big powers. Bangladesh may be seen as a key player in strategic game plans of India, Pakistan, the US and China because of the following reasons.

### **1. Bridge between India and North East:**

The unique geographic location of Bangladesh which cuts the troubled North East region of India off from mainland constitutes a significant security weak point for India for the fact that the region shares border with China and that various insurgent groups are active within the region that are fighting against the Indian government for self determination. In light of their experience in Indo-China war in 1962, the Indian defense planners consider the strategic chicken neck to be inadequate and see Bangladesh to be the safest and the shortest route to transport military logistics to North East region in case of a military conflict between India and China in the future. A strategic corridor through Bangladesh is also seen as important to conduct sustained military campaign against the insurgent groups in North East. The corridor through Bangladesh has economic significance as well because it is the most cost effective route to connect North East with the rest of India for the transshipment of industrial goods to and from North Eastern states, which is vital to



improve the economic condition of this land locked region.

## **2. Bridge between SAARC and ASEAN:**

Bangladesh, which is being regarded as a bridge between SAARC and ASEAN, also has enormous geographic advantages for its proximity to Myanmar and other South East Asian nations to promote interregional economic, political and security cooperation. Once connected via Asian Highway and Trans-Asian Railway, the South and South East Asian nations will be using Bangladesh as the main transit point to increase economic interactions amongst themselves. Bangladesh with appropriate policies and infrastructures in place will be playing pivotal role in defining the direction of economic relations between the two emerging regional groups. Bangladesh being the centre point between the two regions may be able to earn economic benefits because of the economic activities that may undergo in the future.

## **3. Gate Way to Bay of Bengal:**

Bangladesh is considered the gateway to Bay of Bengal with its 45000 sq. miles of sea territory in which lies valuable marine resources such as hydrocarbon, fisheries etc. Its well developed sea ports offer both economic and military opportunities because India can use the port facilities to increase trade with its land locked North East region while other South and South East Asian countries and China can use the same facilities to increase interregional economic interactions. With the ambition to protect the oil transshipment and trade routes in the Indian Ocean, the Chinese navy is making rapid progress in developing relations with the coastal nations such as Myanmar and Bangladesh to gain access to their port facilities so as to conduct sustained naval

operations in the sea. In light of Indo-U.S. Strategic agreement, and recently concluded Joint Declaration of Bangladesh-United States Dialogue on Partnership' it can be assumed that the U.S.A is also seeking similar facilities from Bangladesh as a response to Chinese naval presence in the Bay of Bengal.

## **4. Energy Security:**

Because of her burgeoning population, high economic growth, and rapid industrialization, India has become the sixth largest energy consumer in the world, but she has to import oil to meet 70% of her domestic demand which cost 40% of her total export earnings. She has to diversify import sources for uninterrupted supply of energy, but due to international politics importing hydrocarbon from Iran and Venezuela has become uncertain leaving Bangladesh and Myanmar as only cheap and secure sources of energy supply. While Bangladesh has a speculative gas reserve of 33 TCF, its proven reserve is only 12-15 TCF which is inadequate to meet its own domestic demand so the government has already decided against exporting gas to other countries unless new reserves are found. Even though Bangladesh has expressed her inability to export gas at the moment, India considers Bangladesh a major source of energy in the long run because of its potentials to discover huge hydrocarbon reserves in the Bay of Bengal. Bangladesh also is the most cost effective route for India to import gas from Myanmar; therefore, Bangladesh may emerge as a significant player in regional strategic energy game.

## **5. Balance of Power:**

Bangladesh is significant because of the complex strategic scenario that has emerged due to India's strategic alliance with the U.S.A and USA's

recently concluded Strategic Partnership with Bangladesh, to contain China and its rivalry with Pakistan for regional supremacy. India has to take cognizance of the fact that Bangladesh has established deep military relations with China and repaired her relations with Pakistan to correct the problem in balance of power in her relation with India. So, the possible military role of Bangladesh in case of a war either between India and China or between India and Pakistan could be a strategic concern for India. In light of Bangladesh's endeavor to take control of her own affairs and her attempt to seek greater independence in foreign policy matters, India formulated a set of strategies to isolate, intimidate, and coerce Bangladesh to submit to Indian domination to reap the strategic benefits of breakup of Pakistan.

### **Bangladesh-United States Strategic Partnership**

Bangladesh's emergence on the United States strategic radar reflects the United States changing geo-strategic and geopolitical realities in the South Asia. It seems that US is in search of new geo-strategic partners in the region. The US stronger focus can be gauged from the American media and other related documents. In one recent Wall Street Journal article it was written that "Bangladesh is the standard-bearer of South Asia". In a Congressional Research Paper it was reflected that not surprisingly, Bangladesh is the 'partner of choice for the United States in many of the foreign policy priorities of President Obama'. The Pakistan-America relations are currently going through the terrible phase and this automatically made America to look for someone new which could replace Pakistan. Bangladesh is a

moderate Islamic country which under the current PM Sheikh Hasina has boldly demonstrated 'zero tolerance' for Islamist extremists by liquidating them and nor does it present any prospects of Talibanisation like in Pakistan. In the overall geo-politics of South Asia the American relations with Bangladesh do not create complexities for United States in relation to India and the India-US strategic partnership. Unlike Pakistan, Bangladesh-India relations are comparatively growing with a good pace and are more close and friendly than Indo-Pakistan ties. Therefore, the 'Joint Declaration of Bangladesh-United States Dialogue on Partnership' signed by the two nations during US Secretary Of State Clinton's visit to Dhaka on May 05, 2012 needs to be viewed in this light and without any misgivings.

Bangladesh and United States have been engaged in security cooperation including joint exercises and the United States supplying surplus military equipment to Bangladesh. There was a close door and high security dialogue between the two countries in Dhaka on April, 2012, as a prelude and preparatory discussion for the signing of the Joint Declaration during Hillary Clinton's official visit. The motive behind this Joint Declaration seems to be putting Bangladesh-United States security dialogues and strategic discussions on a regular higher level and in a structured mode. The most important question of the strategic partnership between the two would be how it will impact on the security of the two giants of Asia, China and India. As far as India is concerned, two opposing points will come to the fore. First point is the positive one in which India is seeing this development as an extension of

Indo-US strategic partnership thereby giving rise to Indo-US-Bangladesh strategic Trilateralism. The opposite portent, a highly improbable one, is that a Bangladesh-United States Strategic Partnership as a bipartite security understanding at some later stage may emerge on the same pattern of United States security linkage with Pakistan and all the attendant negative security connotations in its wake for India. However, what is definitely interesting is the American emphasis on Bangladesh's role in the maritime security of the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean. One would have thought that the United States under its Strategic Partnership understandings with India would have acceded this role to India as the dominant naval power in the region. What maritime role for Bangladesh in the Bay of Bengal is the United States envisaging? The biggest impact of any strategic partnership between the two would be on China with which Bangladesh has a Strategic Partnership Agreement. However in Bangladesh policy circle despite lack of geographical contiguity, China was viewed as a countervailing power to India as the outsized and predominant power in the region. In China's policy circle they will view all these developments like Indo-US Partnership and Bangladesh-US strategic partnership as hostile to its establishment. Bangladesh would have to balance its relations with China keeping in view the unfolding of strategic engagements with United States. Bangladesh did not give much hype to this Joint declaration with United States only because of China's factor. However this joint declaration does carry a strategic message to China and the region. In terms of domestic politics, this is a big triumph for PM Sheikh Hasina and her

policies of moderation and zero tolerance for Islamist terrorism. Also, in terms of domestic dynamics the linkage to the United States may rob India-baiters of some of their rationale for berating India and thereby distorting Bangladeshi foreign policies.

### Conclusion

While concluding it is evident that the importance of Bangladesh is growing within and outside the region because of the visit of Hilary Clinton and other innate strategic peculiarities of Bangladesh. The newly appointed Russian Federation Ambassador to Bangladesh, Alexander A Nikolayev, has also said that his country is keen to increase cooperation with Bangladesh. So, the importance of Bangladesh is easily understandable. And against this backdrop, Bangladesh must adopt a shrewd, dynamic foreign policy so that it can handle any situation tactfully/ skillfully, for the sake of upholding its national interest. Here again what needs to be said is that this is a positive gain for the South Asian security environment even if in the process India may have to marginally subordinate its role in Bangladesh. The better way of looking at it would be that the United States may have elected for India and the United States to bat together in complementary roles for security and stability on South Asia's eastern flank. Bangladesh has to show a maturity in handling the strategic position which it will occupy in the new strategic atmosphere and within the events that are going to unfold in the coming time. The coming events are going to be very crucial for the whole South Asia in general and for Bangladesh in particular. So we can say that new strategic atmosphere will be important for every country in the region viz-



a-viz United States, China and Russia and it will be interesting to watch this whole strategic story. Bangladesh must enhance its diplomatic and negotiating skills, as working without efficiency with the US on a yearly is quiet difficult. At the discussion table, Bangladesh could raise the issue of duty free access of its garments in US markets, the issue of Millennium Challenge Fund that will

be beneficial to Bangladesh and most importantly the long pending water sharing disputes with India. So, there are a number of opportunities as well as challenges. And most importantly, to promote the national interest and to get benefit from any agreement with any country, Bangladesh have to be united as a nation - 'united they stand, divided they fall'.

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